

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Nanticoke Unit

The Nanticoke River watershed is one of the least developed watersheds in the Chesapeake Bay region. For nearly 20 years the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, The Chesapeake Conservancy and other organizations have been working together to conserve lands along the Nanticoke. That effort has come to fruition with the acquisition of 825 acres of land as part of the Nanticoke Unit of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

The ecological value of the Nanticoke River watershed is widely recognized. Covering much of southeastern Delaware and a section of the eastern shore of Maryland, the watershed encompasses a significant portion of all tidal wetlands in Maryland and the largest unbroken pine forest on the Delmarva Peninsula.

The watershed – made up of low-lying marshlands and wooded swamps, floodplain forests, and agricultural fields – is home to abundant wildlife. The river itself is a major spawning and nursery area for striped bass, alewives and blueback herring. Black ducks and canvasbacks come here to winter. In the spring, bald eagles nest and rear their young. Delaware has designated the river as an exceptional recreational and ecological resource.



Forested wetland

The partnership to protect the Nanticoke River watershed began in the mid-1990s when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed a proposal to establish a new unit of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) along the river. The Nanticoke Unit was approved when the agency developed a land protection plan for the Blackwater refuge in 2006. Its boundary includes a length of the river corridor in Maryland's Dorchester and Wicomico counties.

By protecting land within the Nanticoke Unit, the Service and its partners have achieved some success in countering the rapid loss of forests and wetlands that is occurring on the Eastern Shore. Land protection efforts within its boundary will help ensure the long-term protection of water quality, biodiversity and ecological health of the watershed. Additionally, the Service will provide opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreation including interpretation of the natural and cultural history of the Chesapeake Bay.

The primary threats facing the Nanticoke River are the draining of wetlands and the cutting of timber to convert land to agriculture. In addition to habitat loss, silt and chemical runoff from these and other activities can also heavily impact the water quality of the river.

Protecting land along the Nanticoke River will help support several regional, national and even international conservation initiatives. For example, the watershed is designated as a Wetlands of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and as a "Last Great Place" by The Nature Conservancy.



Emergent marsh habitat

Regionally, conserving lands within the Nanticoke Unit will contribute to a strategy to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The strategy calls for the protection of an additional two million acres of land throughout the watershed and the establishment of a Chesapeake Treasured Landscape Initiative for resource conservation and public access. This initiative focuses on protecting the most significant landscapes in the Bay.

Additionally, the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail follows the Nanticoke River. The trail commemorates the exploratory voyages of Captain Smith on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries from 1607 to 1609, to share knowledge about the Native American societies and cultures of the seventeenth century, and to interpret the natural history of the Bay.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
1 800/344 WILD
<http://www.fws.gov>

December 2011

